

House bill sets up school-funding task force, puts off final fix until 2017

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The measure is aimed at finding a solution to the state's overreliance on local school levies to pay for basic education, among other issues.

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The Associated Press

The Washington House passed a bill Monday that would instruct the 2017 Legislature to finish repairing the way the state pays for public schools, another step toward answering a state Supreme Court decision and ending \$100,000 a day in fines.

The measure would set up a task force to find a solution to the state's overreliance on local school levies to pay for basic education. It also would ask school districts for more details about the way they spend their local tax money to help lawmakers determine how much of it is paying for things like teacher salaries that the state should be covering.

The levy issue is the last hurdle to bringing lawmakers into compliance with the Washington high court's so-called McCleary decision, in which the justices said school funding was not adequate or uniform. It's also what lawmakers call the most challenging part of the work, and they have said they do not have the capacity or political will to finish it during this year's legislative session.

The Legislature has addressed other issues cited by the court, including putting more than \$2 billion into student transportation, all-day kindergarten, smaller classes and classroom supplies. But a bipartisan group convened by the governor has been working for more than a year to solve the overreliance on local school levies and related questions concerning teacher pay.

The Supreme Court has been holding the state in contempt because the Legislature has not made a plan for finishing the McCleary work, which must be done by 2018. The court has been fining lawmakers \$100,000 a day since August.

The proposal passed Monday, House Bill 2366, moves on to the Senate after a 64-34 vote in favor. All the no votes came from Republicans. Before the vote, several lawmakers spoke against the measure, saying they did not want to delay the work any further or handcuff future lawmakers.

Rep. Matt Manweller, R-Ellensburg, said instructing next year's Legislature to finish the work was an inappropriate use of legislative authority. He said the 2009 Legislature did the same thing to current lawmakers by passing bills to increase school funding, decrease class sizes and end the overreliance on local levies, which the high court ordered be enforced.

"It's ethically troubling that we would do to others what they have done to us," Manweller said.

He also questioned the spirit of the bill, saying it was an attempt to appease the Supreme Court that would not succeed.

"We could give them Czechoslovakia; it wouldn't appease the court," Manweller said, making a reference to the Munich agreement between European leaders and Nazi Germany before World War II.

House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, took issue with Manweller's argument.

"This is not about appeasing the court. This is about living up to a promise we made to a million school kids in 2009," Sullivan said.

He pointed to other ways the Legislature has fulfilled its promises on school funding and said this last step is the one that will fix Washington's broken school system.

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